

Letter from Annie C. Pratt to Alexander Graham Bell, February 2, 1892

345 63 Washington Ave. Chelsea, Mass. Feb. 2, 1892. Dear Mr. Bell,

Your kind letter of "good-by", and those written from your dictation were all received, forwarded to me in Maine, where I went on the 23 of Jan., I returned on the 30, and immediately arranged for an interview with Miss Sullivan and Mr. Anagnos, unfortunately the latter had an engagement that he had not time to postpone, after the receipt of my note, hence, I did not see him. I went to meet my engagement with them, (at the Perkins Inst.) yesterday, Feb. 1, and found poor Miss Sullivan and dear little Helen greatly distressed and exceedingly unhappy. On Saturday, Jan. 30, was the first time the fact had been brought to the notice of Mr. Anagnos of the review of "Frost King", (as published in The Mentor,) by the Goodson Gazette, although the Gazette is regularly received at the Perkins Inst., directly following the publication of each issue, this copy had not been examined by Mr. Anagnos or any of his teachers, until Jan. 30, when a letter to Mr. Anagnos from Dr. Job Williams of Hartford, called attention to it. Now, Mr. Bell, remember I am writing you a confidential communication, writing much more freely than it is my habit to do, and somewhat contrary to my judgment, but I am very anxious to put you in full possession of all the information I have been able to obtain, and to express my views on this subject, based on the present situation of affairs, that you may be able to review the subject understandingly. Immediately upon the receipt of Dr. Williams letter, Mr. Anagnos interviewed Miss Sullivan, and in tone and manner evinced such irritation and annoyance, throwing the burden of responsibility for this mistake upon her &c., so that when I saw the poor little woman on Monday, she was quite broken hearted and in very great trouble. You may rest assured that I soon relieved her over-burdened heart by giving her the assurance I knew you would expect me to furnish her, that of your earnest support, sympathy, counsel and defence, from my own womanly sympathy I gave her what

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she very much needed, motherly love. It was only a short time before she began to derive hope and courage from my this counsel, the nervous strain under which she was laboring was relieved, and she was soon able to answer my inquiries calmly, and look at the situation from quite a different standpoint from that she occupied at the beginning of my call. Before going on with this account, let me say, that in addition to furnishing the editors of The Mentor with a copy of this story of Helen's, Mr. Anagnos has published it, with laudatory comments of his own, in his Report for 1892, this Report is the sixtieth Annual Report of the Trustees of the Perkins Inst, and is published as a Public Document by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and distributed in same manner. Before going out to South Boston on Monday, I went up to the State House and obtained a copy, in order to learn full particulars. I inquired about the distribution up to that date, and learned that about 50 copies had then been distributed, besides, a copy to each member of the House of Representatives, and of the Senate. I asked Miss Sullivan what Mr. Anagnos had done about, suspending further distribution of these P Reports for the present &c., she thought he had done nothing, I told her that I should consider it advisable to request the suspension of this distribution temporarily, and also, to request the members of the two State Depts. to return the copies distributed to them, stating as a reason, that Mr. Anagnos had discovered that an error had been committed in the report which he desired to rectify &c., without making any more detailed explanation, as in my judgment it would not be necessary to do so, then as soon as the full facts could be ascertained, publish them in explanation and apology, in the form of a circular, and have a copy securely fastened inside the cover of each of the copies of the Report, and permit the distribution to proceed as usual. I have not learned if Mr. Anagnos considered this a wise manner of managing the affair, but I thought it would be such as you would advise and approve. An immediate admission of an error as soon as discovered, accompanied by a dignified apology, will always, in my judgment, do more to disarm criticism, and establish confidence in the public mind, than any other form of procedure.

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Now, as soon as Miss Sullivan heard from Mr. Anagnos of the article in the Goodson Gazette, she ran to Helen for explanation, and found her as ignorant as her self, the child answered "Why, no, dear teacher, I never heard that story, that is my story for Mr. Anagnos' birth-day", upon being told that the paper said Miss Canby had written the "Frost Faries," many years before, that it was almost the same as her "Frost King," that much of the language was exactly the same, she was greatly pained, but could give no explanation; all this, but added to Miss Sullivan's distress and anxiety, for she depends on Helen's memory at all times, it is her habit to go to her for dates, for facts, and any information that has escaped her own recollection, in part, or in whole.

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(While I talked with Miss Sullivan on this day, on other matters not immediately connected with this subject, but which required chronological arrangement, she was many times unable to state precisely when or where an event occurred, so she would say, "wait a moment, I will go and ask Helen about that," a proceeding to do so, Helen would, sometimes at once, sometimes with an instant's thought, give Miss Sullivan the information desired, or give her such other information as would enable Miss Sullivan to recall the whole matter, and Helen would many times continue to speak of other matters in connection with some event inquired for, which would greatly assist us in adding to our statements.)

I judge from your letter to me, that you were in hopes we might learn that Helen wrote this story, at the time she was separated from Miss Sullivan in December last, (while Miss Sullivan was at the Pasteur Inst. in N.Y.), but that is not the fact. She wrote this story in October last at Tusculum, she was about two weeks at work upon it, (she has less time at home for writing, as Miss Sullivan keeps her at her lessons with some strictness, more so, than she can well observe when in Boston, on account of the constant interruption of visitors, which Mr. Anagnos expects her to entertain), she does all her writing in Braille and afterwards copies it into the square letters, in which her communications appear,

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when th she announced before commencing this story that she was about to write a story to send Mr. Anagnos for his birthday, and Miss Sullivan and others of the family, knew when she was going on with it; when it was finished (in Braille) Miss Sullivan read it to Major and Mrs. Keller, when she had finished the reading, Maj. Keller said, "Miss Annie, do you not think Helen has read this story somewhere had these ideas gives her ?" she answered "Indeed, I do not know sir, I never heard it before , I am very sure", Helen was sitting by her mother, and Mrs. Keller, said "I will ask her about it", this she proceeded to do, and Helen at once replied "No, "with some emphasis," this is my birth-day story for Mr. Anagnos," to impute to Helen anything that would carry the suspicion of the possibility of an untruth, never entered their minds, and as Miss Sullivan, (and perhaps her parents), have been induced to consider this child to possess an order of mind of a marvellous character , quite distinct from that of any other person, and entirely unequaled by hearing persons even of adult years, no further comment was made other than that of wonder and astonishment. In due course of tim 4 time, Miss Sullivan interlined Helen's manuscript, (Mr. Anagnos cannot himself read the writing in Braille, employed by all the pupils at the Perkins Inst.) and forwa Helen wrote a short letter to Mr. Anagnos, (this letter appears in the Report of P e rkins Inst. before mentioned), enclosed her story, and forwarded them to him, her letter is dated Nov. 4, 1891, the birth-day she desired to honor occured on Nov. 7, following. Miss Sullivan was bitten by the dog about the middle of this month, and went to New York about the 20, &c. (Here, let me state, do not make use of these dates, or these statements, in any public way, until I have had an opportunity to carefully review them with Miss Sullivan, for you must bear in mind, that the dear little woman, had been suffering a very severe mental strain, for 48 hours previous to my interview with her, and it was only to assist her to be re-assured and comforted, that I talked on, at any length with her on this subject,) for instance, while Miss Sullivan expressly told me, that Mr. Anagnos had the original manuscript in Braille, I am not certain whether Helen also copied it for him in the square letters, all these, and many other points, I will have perfectly clear at our next interview.

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Miss Sullivan told me that Mr. Anagnos read this letter to several gentlemen who were at one time visiting the Inst., and they all wondered and talked about it, but she is not aware that any person advanced the thought that the basis of the story might not be original, "Mr. Anagnos invariably makes such a ? point of Helen's remarkable genius, that her use of language, her mental activity, her originality of thought &c. &c. are entirely unparalleled &c. that no one would think of doubting the originality of anything she might do or say; I do not consider myself a judge, I know she is a wonder to me many times, but I have had but little opportunity for comparing her with other very bright children, Mr. Anagnos drags everything I write or say of Helen into print, I do not like it, neither is it at all pleasing to her father and mother, but I am under great obligations to Mr. Anagnos, and could not well oppose him in anything, nor do I wish to, if it is best for him to do these things; when once the first Report was published in 1888, containing extracts from my letters to him about Helen, and other statements he desired me to make, there seemed to be no place to stop, as the public had become interested, and we were a telling card for the Inst., and about this I do not see how I am to blame any more as much as he is, I never heard the story, Helen can not remember that she ever did, Mr. Anagnos should not blame me, because he chose to put it in type, he never said anything to me about it anyway, he has always printed things about Helen and myself without consulting us &c.," are some of the things by means of which Miss Sullivan's over-burdened thoughts relieved themselves on Monday, but which I regard as confidential, and communicated to you only for the purpose of placing you in possession of facts and circumstances, which may be of advantage to you, if you should find it advisable to speak or write on this subject.

On Monday when I arrived at the Oliver Cottage, Miss Sullivan and Helen were in tears, and Miss Sullivan was endeavoring with the assistance of one of her friends, a teacher there, to ascertain from conversing with Helen, if the fact of the similarity of the two stories "Frost Faries" and "Frost King", was not an evidence in proof of the theory recently advanced by Mark Twain, published ? in one of our popular magazines two persons having exactly the same thought — After a little conversation I persuaded her not to

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trouble the dear child further on the subject, but let her run and play, and at some time, when she was herself calm, have a quiet talk with Helen by herself, when something of importance might be recalled. On careful inquiry, I found that neither Miss Sullivan or her friend, could tell with certainty, that Miss Canby's story was not published in any of the books for children, printed in raised letters and on the shelves of the library of the Perkins Inst., and advised Miss Marrett (the teacher referred to), at once to establish, under her own superintendence, and with the assistance of her fellow teachers, a thorough search through these volumes, and through the Readers used in the school, to leave no book unexamined, where, by any possibility it might be found; having exhausted this search, and finding nothing of this story printed in raised letters, then one source where Helen could have obtained these ideas was cut off, as all her own books in raised letters, which could contain the story, are duplicate of those at the Perkins Inst., then to me, it seems but a matter of methodical research, to trace Helen's visits and associates over a period so short and recent as the five years since it has been in Helen's power to understand the manual alphabet.

The whole matter is only to find, either the story in raised letters, where she has read it for herself, or, to ascertain when, where and by whom the story was communicated to her by means of her hands. Whichever, it is plainly evident, that it was not recently she acquired the thoughts, but so long since, that she has forgotten the source of information, and has possessed them so long, dwelt upon the ideas so much &c. that she is not aware but they are her own. Do you not think Mr. Bell, that you will be able to make from this whole affair one of the strongest arguments in proof of your long since expressed theory that even the very youngest of the deaf children should have books, books, books placed in their hands? Miss Sullivan assures me that Helen has always made great use of the ideas expressed by her favorite authors, the tale of Hyacinthus, read to her long since, impressed her very forcibly, and she is constantly in the habit of using it in parts, either by comparison, or in some form, many times using the exact language, at others so changing it as to render it unrecognizable except by herself, or

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some one equally familiar with it, and with the child. This winter, one day when it was snowing Miss Sullivan took Helen out into the grounds of the Inst. and let her feel the snow falling, it pleased her much, and as she came in she said, "she shakes the snow from her garments" Miss S. asked her what she meant, she explained and illustrated the act of a figure in female attire shaking the snow from their garments, but Miss S. could not understand how Helen should have conceived the idea of a large figure overhead in the air &c. , and as she could not herself recollect ever having read the simile anywhere , she applied to several of the teachers at the Inst., not one could recall having read any such comparison, finally, one lady set herself to the task of discovering if any such comparison was printed in the raised letter books, and after very careful examination she found the expression in one of Longfellow's minor poems, but our Helen had caught and retained the words, and this day she had found and applied their meaning. Please, Mr. Bell, do not give this away, I am treasuring it for our Souvenir article, I have one more, better than this even, but do not quite dare to trust you with it, for the Souvenir is to have it, and I would like to have it appear first in that publication, besides, I fear I shall weary you with this already needlessly lengthy communication.

I think we shall find that some of Helen's cousins, or other relatives at the south, have sometime read Helen the story of the Frost Fairies. Miss Sullivan had written to Major and Mrs. Keller of this trouble which had come upon them, before I saw her, and she asked me to write them to-day, I have done so, and suggested systematic search as mentioned above, Miss Sullivan thinks they will not mind about the affair as she does, or as families at the north would, and fears they will not take as much trouble to investigate thoroughly as we would &c. — 7 I conclude from your letter (the last to me from Washington) that you did not quite understand about the paper from Miss Sullivan, for the Souvenir, it was not prepared as "copy" for the printer, but hastily drawn up for your inspection, in order to learn from you if all the points had been emphasized which you wished her to note, your letter to her plainly shows what you wish additional, but the information can all be included in her

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paper, unless you r prefer it should appear in the form of correspondence, in accordance with your suggestion, viz:

1st, Miss S's paper as you saw it.

2nd, Your letter to Miss Sullivan.

3rd, Miss Sullivan's reply to your inquiries.

(The two letters to appear as an addendum to the book)

Now that we have the complication of the Frost King, I would suggest that she include a brief explanation of this matter as a part of her paper, and then we print the two stories side by side in full , and bind them in as an appendix to the Souvenir, as an illustration of the remarkable command of language Helen has acquired &c. Did you think it would be advisable to print the two stories side by side as a part of Miss Sullivan's paper?

Very sincerely, Annie G. Pratt. An avalanche of letters found in our Mr. Monday all more or less friendly, but refreshing explanation, except for Blind. That was severe. amounting almost to exists between these two and not long since the became an annoying critic some matters relating to the hence, they were ready .